

Kindred Spirit

by Empatheia

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Summary: Filling in the blanks as to how Quistis knew Martine "quite well."

Kindred Spirit

****A/N:**** Written after a conversation I had with Luna Manar quite some time ago about crackships. This is a favourite of mine, and I never bought that Quistis was on close personal terms with Martine as a tiny G-Garden junior cadet, so this is my personal headcanon as to how it went instead. Meant to be loosely canon-compliant, but may have inconsistencies; forgive me if you find any, I haven't played the game in quite a while and my memory isn't the best.

****KINDRED SPIRIT****

"You realize you're going to have to dance at least once," Xu murmured in her ear. "You might as well get it over with. Just pick someone you don't recognize; you'll probably never see them again anyway."

Quistis gnawed her lip and scanned the crowd. The faces blurred together a little. Perhaps she had fortified her nerves a little too enthusiastically.

It wasn't that she didn't know how to dance. She understood the theory of it, she could execute the steps in time with the music, and her form was flawless. She was an excellent dancer, really. She just couldn't... dance. What small grace she possessed inevitably drained right out of her the moment she put her hand in her partner's.

This was her third graduation ball, and she seemed to be getting worse over the years rather than better, somehow.

"Why can't I just dance with you?" she said, a little plaintively.

"At least then I won't have to look at some stranger's face while I embarrass myself."

"Neither of us know how to lead," Xu reminded her. "I thought the idea was to avoid embarrassment."

"I could figure it out," Quistis muttered, but she'd already lost and she knew it. She sighed and looked around for a waiter to take her empty champagne flute.

Before she found one, Xu suddenly straightened beside her, reached out and neatly plucked the flute away, leaving her with nothing to do with her hands. "Heads up, girl."

Someone was approaching her. Very clearly approaching her, not Xu; he nodded his head to Xu briefly to acknowledge her presence, then fixed his eyes on Quistis and kept them there.

She assessed him.

It was hard to get a read on his age. At first glance, from a distance, she had thought fifty or so, but she revised that quite drastically downwards as he came close enough for her to get a good look at his face. It was a thing built of sharp angles and hollowed planes, which gave it a severity that made him look older than he was, but there were only faint wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, and his pale receding hairline was the fault of bad genes, not advanced years. His back and shoulders were very straight, still powerful with youth.

He wore fine leather boots and a royal blue frock coat edged rather ostentatiously with gold, but the way he wore it made it look more dignified than flashy.

Much closer to forty than fifty, she decided. Perhaps even still in his late thirties. Not particularly handsome, but then, she wasn't looking.

He looked vaguely familiar to her, but she couldn't place him at all. She hated that feeling.

"I have been informed," he said in a low, polished voice, casting a telling glance across the floor towards Headmaster Cid, "that I am obligated to dance at least once before I am allowed to make my escape."

"That is the rule, unfortunately," Quistis confirmed with open sympathy.

Xu surreptitiously kicked her ankle. Quistis flinched, but didn't retaliate immediately. There would be time for that later.

"I thought," said the man, "I would find someone who looked equally unwilling and see if we couldn't muddle through it together. How about it?"

Despite herself, she smiled, and he answered it with a slightly lopsided one of his own. It looked a little strange on his dour face, a little incongruous, but the overall effect was quite nice. A bit like the moon shining momentarily through an impressive bank of

clouds.

"Deal," she said, and held out her hand.

Her practical boots were not well suited to ballroom dancing, but it was tradition for SeeDs to attend in uniform, and various protests had yet to overturn that expectation. Some girls managed to look graceful in the square-shouldered jackets, straight-cut skirts and low-heeled boots. She wasn't sure how. The SeeD uniform was regal and imposing, and she liked that about it, but at times like this she envied the civilian guests a little. Many of the women were decked out in gorgeous little cocktail dresses and strings of pearls and tiny, delicate heels which were no doubt quite painful to wear but undeniably suited the mirrorlike dance floor much better.

Feeling simultaneously over- and under-dressed, she followed his lead out into the throng.

"Martine Dodonna," he said by way of introduction.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, snapping her fingers. "Headmaster! I can't believe I didn't recognize you. It must be the new coat. Very sharp, by the way."

"Thank you?" he said, looking a little lost.

"I studied at Galbadia Garden when I first enlisted," she clarified, "for a few months, before transferring out to join the SeeD program. I saw you from a distance a few times, but never had the honour of meeting you in person, being a lowly junior cadet at the time. I've been back three times since for various reasons, but I always dealt with your adjutant. I had the distinct impression that you weren't the type to attend social functions. Pardon my presumption."

"I don't, when I can avoid it," he said, scowling briefly and waving off her apology. "Kramer can be... obstinate."

Quistis snorted, then schooled her expression to studied blandness. "Far be it from me to speak ill of my esteemed leader. Quistis Trepe, pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Likewise. You must be relieved to be done with your exams," he said.

"Actually," she said, blushing in advance of what she knew was going to sound like boasting, "I passed my exams two years ago. I've just been promoted to instructor."

He turned back to look at her, thin eyebrows raised. "Forgive me, I'm not very good at guessing ages, butâ€"

"I'm seventeen," she provided. "Graduated at fifteen."

"That makes you one of the youngest in history," he said. Not trying to flatter her, just stating the fact of the matter.

The blush deepened despite her best efforts. "So I'm told."

Mercifully, the band rescued her, striking up the first notes of a

familiar waltz. He turned the rest of the way to face her head-on, and she put her free hand on his stately shoulder as he settled his at her waist. She braced herself for five minutes of awkward booted stomping around, as experience had led her to expect.

That failed to happen.

Unlike her various previous partners, he didn't ask grace of her, and that made a world of difference. His leadership didn't try to turn her into a spangled feather twirling about in his arms, like the civilian ladies in their airy little dresses; he made the dance feel almost like a marching drill, an exercise in power and precision.

She could work with that.

When the waltz was over, they made a dignified exit back towards where Xu was waiting and watching with her eyebrows obnoxiously high on her forehead.

Quistis was a little flushed, and to her embarrassment, breathing a little hard. Martine showed no sign of effort at all, which made her embarrassment worse.

"You're an excellent dancer," he told her, and again, it wasn't flattery or something to be argued with. Just a statement of fact.

"Thank you," she said, almost believing it when it came from him. That had indeed been an excellent dance. In her opinion, at least. "So are you."

He barked a laugh. "You're the first to say so," he said, looking almost embarrassed. "I've been told I'm too... forceful."

"Suited me just fine," Quistis said honestly.

He swept her a bow. "Thank you sincerely for helping me fulfill my obligations," he said. "Now Kramer can't complain anymore."

"Neither can my friend here, so I owe you thanks in turn."

They smiled at each other for a moment longer. Then Quistis ducked a quick but point-perfect curtsy and returned to Xu's side. She could hear Martine walking away behind her.

Xu caught her by the upper arms as soon as she came within reach and pulled her into the lee of a pillar, hissing "What was _that?_" under her delighted breath.

Quistis frowned at her. "What was what?"

"That! Out there! You made everyone else look like they were barely moving. I thought you were going to run into other couples like five times. That was... That was _intense._ I didn't know you had it in you."

Valiantly, Quistis did her best not to blush again. It mostly worked. "I guess it's true what the instructor said, about partners needing to suit each other."

Xu's eyebrows climbed most of the way up off her forehead.

Quistis stepped on her foot.

"What was that for?" Xu asked, aggrieved.

"Payback."

"Do you think he'll come ask you again?" Xu said instead of protesting that, because she knew damn well she'd had it coming.

Quistis shrugged. "I don't see why he would." He'd fulfilled his obligation, and now he could bow out politely like he'd wanted to. Quistis had to stay until it wrapped up â€" all the SeedS did, as they were nominally its hosts â€" but he was probably halfway to the gate already.

Or... still here, talking to Cid? She spotted him across the floor, leaning down to talk to her headmaster with a rather impressive scowl on his face. Cid wasn't very intimidating, but there was something about him that made him hard to say no to outright. People were often reduced to jumping through increasingly awkward hoops looking for a way out and not finding one. He got what he wanted in the end more often than not.

After a couple of minutes, as the current number was winding down, the conversation apparently came to an end, but Martine didn't leave. He stalked aggressively over to a pillar and leaned against it with his arms folded in a manner that almost, but not quite, came across as petulant.

Xu followed her line of sight and grinned. "Go on, then, go save him."

Quistis mumbled a protest, but her feet were already moving.

He looked up as she approached and immediately looked about 50% less put-out. "Miss Trepe," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"Did you get corralled into staying for another dance?" she asked. "I saw the look on your face, and you obviously haven't ducked out like I think you intended to, so I figured something must've happened."

"He insisted that I stay and 'enjoy' the party a while longer," Martine gritted. "I've 'enjoyed' the party quite enough, in my apparently irrelevant opinion, but when he doesn't want to hear something you might as well be shouting into the wind."

"I know exactly what you mean," Quistis said fervently, having tried to make a number of suggestions since becoming a Seed that had been very blithely ignored in favour of the status quo. "If you can't get out of it, though, you might as well make the best of it."

He inclined his head a fraction. "Meaning?"

"I don't hate the idea of one more dance," she said.

So they had another, and then another, and then retired to the balcony to talk for a long time under the gentle spring moonlight. To any civilian listening in, their topics of choice might have seemed strange talk for what was meant to be a celebration, but he ran a Garden and she was a Seed, so it was very natural that they spoke mostly of the business of war.

He preferred the tactical and political ends of things to the nitty-gritty, whereas she would much rather have her boots on the battlefield than have to worry about intrigue, but they had enough knowledge in common to inform each other rather than fail to communicate.

The conversation survived the initial stages, then thrived. She hadn't talked with anyone like this in... years, perhaps. Not even Xu. She and Xu had too much in common, so that lengthy in-depth discussions were almost always unnecessary.

It was nice. She liked being listened to like she had something worth saying, and she liked what he had to say in turn, though some of it was little more hawkish than she was entirely comfortable with. The business of war was not beautiful, and she knew better than to think she'd already come to terms with the worst of it.

When the fãte began to wind down indoors, he thanked her and bid her a good night and swept another bow, then vanished into the crowd as it filed out.

Not at all the miserable evening she had expected. She smiled.

One week later

The courier from Balamb town's postal center dropped an envelope on her desk and raced out, perpetually behind schedule. Quistis frowned. She hadn't been expecting a letter. She had no contacts outside Garden who were at all likely to write to her, and anyone within Garden would not have needed the services of the courier.

Peeling it open, she scanned its contents with growing surprise.

Dear Ms. Trepe,

I hope this letter finds you in good health. I know this may seem somewhat strange, but I felt compelled to write to you in order to thank you again.

I have been coerced into attending several of those abysmal affairs over the past dozen years, and they have inevitably been miserable. I am not built for parties, as you correctly deduced, likely you seem to be of a similar sort yourself.

Through your skill on the dance floor and your quick mind for conversation, you turned something to be endured into something to be enjoyed, and I am grateful.

You are a remarkable young woman, and I foresee a bright future for you. (It's a pity we lost a talent like you to B-Garden.) If there's ever anything I can do to facilitate said future, send word, and if it's in my power I'll see it done.

I owe you one, Ms. Trepe, and I never forget my debts.

Martine Dodonna

Hardly pausing to think about it, she rooted through her drawers until she found a serviceable sheet of looseleaf and a pen.

Dear Headmaster Dodonna,

_Please, it's Quistis. Only my students call me Ms. Trepe.

_

Secondly, you don't owe me anything! You saved me from a miserable evening, just as I apparently saved you, so we're even.

That said, thank you for the compliments. I would return them, but I think I might embarrass myself. It was an honour and a joy to spend the evening with you. If you come again next year, might I be so bold as to request that you save the first dance for me?

Quistis Trepe

She caught the courier on his way out and sent it off.

Martine's reply came mere days later:

Dear Quistis,

If I am to call you by your name, you must call me by mine. It's only fair.

And as far as I'm concerned, you can have every dance.

Martine

Over the following months, they exchanged more letters of increasing length and familiarity, until she was treating her letters to him almost as an interactive journal and he was doing much the same.

She entertained him with her stories from the classroom, of fire spells gone awry and rascally cheaters not quite sly enough to get away with it. He told her all about the travails of running a military school the size of Galbadia Garden and all the political knottiness that came along with being financially and otherwise beholden to the nation's government.

Though the details of missions were classified, she told him what she could, and he shared gossip from Galbadia and its neighbouring nations whenever he thought it might interest her.

They weren't friends, exactly, but they were something substantial, and she didn't have many substantial things in her life. She was grateful for this one, and looked forward to every letter with warmth in her heart.

Xu, of course, was insufferable about it.

One year later

Quistis looked down at her dress boots, idly inspecting them while the champagne settled in. They were getting quite worn around the edges; she'd had them two years, and the last year had been very active, what with all the field exercises and exams and missions she'd been in charge of. She would have to requisition a new pair soon and spend a few painful weeks breaking them in, regrettably. These were so comfortable now that she barely felt them, but if the sole came peeling off halfway through a battle she'd be in trouble.

There was nothing for it. She'd talk to the quartermaster in a few days, after the post-party cleanup was dealt with. She'd be back in the field more than ever now that she was no longer an instructor.

It hurt to think about, a lot, but in a strange way it was also a relief. She'd known from the beginning that it wasn't a good fit for her, however much she had wanted it to be. Cid giving her the position had been an honour, and she'd been so grateful, but now she saw it for the lesson about leadership it was. Acing exams wasn't everything. Being cool under pressure wasn't enough. She had to connect to the people around her and bring out the best in them, and she couldn't.

She still had so much to learn, about so many things.

"Stop staring at the floor, you look like a wallflower," Xu said, elbowing her.

Quistis elbowed her back. "I am a wallflower. I'm waiting for the champagne trays to go around enough times to make the idea of dancing tolerable."

At the moment, she was watching Squall and an astonishingly beautiful black-haired girl soar around the floor and feeling awkward and bitter about it. She had asked Squall for a dance earlier, willing to soldier through the embarrassment for any chance to get closer, but he'd turned her down flat without even seeming to realize how badly it stung her. He wasn't looking at her. He never really looked at anyone. She'd hoped she might be different, eventually, if she were persistent enough, but that thin sliver of hope was withering in front of her eyes. Squall was looking at that black-haired girl he'd just met like... like she was real to him, already, in a way that Quistis still wasn't after years of being in his proximity.

Her strange and tangled feelings for or towards Squall had only gotten stranger and more tangled over the last year, and she was about fed up with it. What was she even hoping for? She could barely hold up a conversation with him, even at the best of times. She could hardly see herself in an actual relationship with him.

She just wanted to be closer, somehow, so much closer than this, and to her great frustration, she couldn't seem to let that long-standing desire go. Every single thing she did to purge it from her heart only seemed to make it stronger. It was tiring, but she was out of ideas.

"Want me to tell you who she is?" Xu offered, watching the black-haired girl bend over Squall's arm like they're done it a

hundred times. Xu seemed to know everything long before she had any right to know it. She was much better at the "spy" part of their job description than the "soldier" part.

"No," Quistis lied.

Xu, of course, told her anyway. "She's the daughter of some Galbadian bigshot. Ran away from home last year and started working with a resistance faction in Timber. Apparently Seifer got her an invitation, expecting that he'd be here to make introductions... obviously that didn't work out so well, but it looks like she's doing all right."

Quistis didn't even ask where she'd learned that. One of the disciplinary committee, most likely, if Seifer was involved. Raijin wasn't particularly good at keeping his mouth shut when pretty girls smiled at him.

Her immediate, instinctive dislike for the girl deepened. Squall's reaction to her was bad enough, though not actually her fault, but Quistis had a special chip on her shoulder when it came to children who ran away from home. She'd never had a real home to run from. It bothered her when people took that privilege for granted.

"If she's here for Seifer, how come she's staying even though he isn't here?"

"I have an inkling as to that," said a low, polished voice at Quistis' back.

She turned around and smiled, holding out her hands to take his in a friendly clasp. "Headmaster Dodonna! You didn't tell me you were coming. I didn't expect to see you again for at least a few more years."

"I've told you ten times if I've told you once, it's Martine to you. And yes, that would have been my preference, but... well. The situation has changed, and continues to change. Things are shifting. I have some, er, concerns. I came to discuss them with Kramer, and I thought it would be best if I didn't make a specific visit for that purpose."

Quistis frowned. "I'm going to assume my clearance level isn't sufficient, since you haven't already told me."

He smiled at her, surprisingly gentle. "No, not at this time. But I can tell you this much: that girl is almost certainly here to petition Kramer for SeeD assistance with Timber's resistance efforts. She's making quite a name for herself in some circles, though I doubt she knows that. Surprisingly competent considering her age and background. Remarkably charismatic. If she could get a decent team together she could really do some damage."

Hearing Martine praise her made Quistis feel worse. Her mouth twisted sourly. She didn't want to be this person, this jealous, resentful mess who could so easily find it in herself to dislike a pretty girl not much younger than she was for... what? Being praiseworthy in areas Quistis fell short in? Getting something Quistis wanted but had no claim to? That wasn't fair, and she knew it, but all the same she could hardly see through all the green in her eyes.

"I thought you were on Galbadia's side?" she said, in lieu of expressing any of that. They may have exchanged quite a number of letters over the last year, but she wasn't ready to assume they were that kind of friends just because they were pen pals. If she was wrong, it would be painfully humiliating. She wouldn't burden him with her feelings about boys unless he clearly indicated that he was interested in hearing them, which was not likely to happen.

"I am a patriot, yes," he said, "but part of being a patriot is recognizing when your country is in the wrong, and the occupation of Timber was never a good idea. It sowed dissent when we most needed unity. That there would be resistance was obvious from the start; Deling's only options were to crush it utterly or negotiate from his advantageous position, and he has been unable to do the first and unwilling to do the second. He is a fool who has not deserved his position in a very long time. If Timber successfully resists him, it will serve him right."

"I see," she said, and she did. Politics still wasn't her forte, but she had learned a lot from him over the past year, and she knew enough to grasp the import of what he was saying.

She had heard murmurs of the stirring in Galbadia, had heard about the new power setting foot on stage, though the spotlight hadn't landed yet.

Occupation, unrest, a new player. The political landscape shifting. It would be a good year for SeeD, and for Martine's ranks of mundane mercenaries.

"But I didn't come tonight to talk your ear off about politics," Martine said then with a wry smile. "I came to dance with you."

"I thought you came to talk with Cid," Quistis teased, though she felt the beginnings of a blush creeping up the backs of her ears.

Martine grimaced. "That too, but that can wait."

He held out a hand. She gave him hers, and followed him out onto the floor as a new song started.

This time she was ready for his energetic style, and kept pace effortlessly. It was a good thing the ballroom floor wasn't as fragile as it looked.

They said nothing to each other while they were dancing, too focused on avoiding all the other couples, but when it was finished they stepped aside and snagged fresh champagne flutes from the trays.

"If I might ask," he said after downing half of his, uncharacteristically diffident, "is everything all right?"

She looked up at him and found real concern in his eyes, which was somehow not something she had expected and not something she knew how to react to. "Why do you ask?" she replied stiffly.

He winced. "I didn't mean to imply that you look unwell, it's just... earlier, when I came up to you, you looked upset. I thought there

might be something I could do."

It was her turn to wince. She was really lost here, but she couldn't just shut him down with the usual wall of ice she turned on the Trepies when they got too forward. He was... not her friend, probably, but he was something to her that deserved better than that. "There really isn't," she assured him quietly, "but thank you for offering. I just... I have some maturing to do, I suppose."

He smiled fondly down at her and clicked his glass against hers. "I have every faith in you."

She laughed. "Thank you. I might need that."

"Is it a boy?"

Scandalized, she glared up at him and smacked his arm with her free hand. "None of your business!" She sounded like Squall, she realized suddenly, and that made her feel something unpleasant. Squall being Squall-like was the source of her frustrations; she didn't like the idea that she was making or contributing to her own problems.

She was, though, and she knew it.

Unpleasant.

"It is, then," he said, a little smug. "I thought so."

"I suppose you're an expert, then," she snapped waspishly.

To her surprise, that made him draw back and close down. "No," he said softly. "No, I wouldn't say that. I'm sorry. You're right, it isn't any of my business. I'm not very good at this, as you may have noticed."

"Well, me neither," she said grumpily, but she could feel herself softening already. "Yes, a boy, and it's silly. You don't want to hear about it."

"On the contrary," he protested. "I couldn't run a school or dabble in politics without developing a taste for gossip. I won't laugh at you, I promise."

She believed him. Incredibly, she believed him. So, to her own great amazement, she told him. Not all of it, of course, and not the full depth of it either, but enough to constitute the gist. Her strange, tangled feelings, Squall's complete unresponsiveness, her inability to give up despite knowing it wouldn't go anywhere.

"If I might give you a bit of advice that I only rarely take myself," he said when she was finished. "You might find it easier to let go if you set yourself a finish line of sorts. A point of no return. Put it all on the table one last time, and decide in advance that if the results aren't satisfactory this time, you'll cut your losses and stop throwing good effort after bad."

She raised one skeptical eyebrow. "You want me to just confess? Outright?"

He shrugged. "If that's what it would take to really get you that

closure. I don't think it has to be that extreme. All that's important is that you set the conditions and obey your own rules."

Quistis thought about it. This was a time of emotional upheaval for her already, with her demotion and everything, and she didn't really want to add to it right now... but then, maybe now was the best time, while the ground was already broken. Before she settled into the rut of whatever her new status quo would be. This was a day of change; she might as well make the best of it.

"You say you don't follow your own advice," Quistis said, "so I really shouldn't trust it, but I feel a little reckless tonight."

"You'd best catch him before he leaves, then," Martine said with a nod towards the balcony.

She could see a familiar silhouette leaning against the railing, looking characteristically prickly.

Quistis reddened. "You might not be good at people, but your eyes are entirely too sharp," she said.

He winked. "I've had a lot of practice. Off you go, then. Best of luck. Write me a letter."

Reckless, she'd said. She could be reckless. Just for tonight. She downed the last of her champagne, then on a whim, snagged Martine's flute out of his hand and polished his off too. Then she handed both of the empty flutes to him and squared her shoulders.

It wasn't going to go well, she could feel it, but she was tired of this. She wanted to draw that line he'd described and hold to it. It was good advice, probably.

She'd survive.

Not quite a week later, after Timber

The cadet left her in front of the headmaster's office, evidently lacking the nerve to knock on the massive wooden door for her.

That was all right. She hadn't really wanted an audience anyway. She knew full well that G-Garden's students were competent enough to justify their arrogance, having once been one herself, but that didn't mean she had to like them now any more than she had then.

She rapped smartly with her knuckles three times.

A familiar voice called out "Come on in, but make it quick."

"I'll do my best," she said as she let the ponderous door swing shut at her back.

Martine looked up from his paperwork, eyes widening as he realized who it was. Without preamble, he skirted his desk and crossed the room to catch her up in a powerful hug. He let her go almost immediately, and she could tell that it wasn't something he was used to doing.

Gripping her upper arms, he stared down into her eyes. "I am profoundly glad to see you alive and well," he said, sounding a little unsteady. "After that fiasco at the station... I was able to get some information from my sources, but next to nothing about you or your team. All the focus was on that fool of a boy"

"Seifer," Quistis supplied dully. The relief of having reached safety was beginning to sink in, and she realized she was exhausted. "His name is Seifer, and I should have seen it coming."

"I don't see how you could have," he said. "Come, sit down. I'll get you some water."

Obediently, she took the seat in front of his desk, and he sat down in his own chair and pushed a tall, foggy glass across to her. The shock of the chill made her feel a little more alert.

"I should have, because Xu told me he was mixed up with Rinoa, and I knew he'd broken out of his detention cell, and this is... this is _classic_ Seifer. Swooping in to save the day at the most dramatic moment rather than being there with his shoulder to the grindstone from the start. Of course he couldn't resist the opportunity to make such a grand gesture. I should have seen it coming."

"Could you have stopped it even if you had?" Martine said gently, reaching out to take her hands. "It isn't your fault."

"What's going to happen to him? Do you know?"

Martine winced, and from that alone she knew.

"Never mind," she said. "I can guess. Execution. There's no way they'd let him get away with assaulting the president."

"I'm very sorry," Martine said, squeezing her hands and then letting go to lean back, creating a little necessary distance. "I hesitate to say this, it may sound callous, but... it could have been quite a lot worse. He took all the blame, so they classed it as an independent action."

Quistis raised her head, abruptly horrified. "Instead of holding Garden responsible on the whole?"

"Yes. You may have heard that the sorceress has had her eye on my facility for quite some time now... this would have been the perfect pretext under which to demand that I lend my forces to a retaliation attempt, thereby forcing me into a difficult choice and getting her foot in the door. We call ourselves politically neutral, but as Deling employs most of our alumni and controls the lands surrounding our campus, our neutrality is nominal at best. I don't know why she didn't, or why Deling himself didn't, for that matter. Whatever the case, it was a close thing."

The ice cubes in the glass were clinking uneasily, and she realized it was because her hands were shaking. The entire might of the Galbadian army, plus the draft from G-Garden, marching on B-Garden? Balamb and its para-magic advantage might have been able to beat the invasion back, but not without heavy losses. She'd never considered the idea of war landing directly on her doorstep before. She didn't

like it much.

"It could have been worse," she echoed.

But Seifer. That was enough of a loss already. She didn't like him, had never liked him, but she had never denied his gift for violence. If they had been able to shape that, channel it into a less volatile form... but they hadn't, not in time, and now he was dead.

It was natural to grieve, and she had lost classmates and peers on the battlefield before so she knew how it worked, but this hurt a great deal more than she would have expected. She curled over, pillowing her forehead on her forearms and feeling the cool wood of Martine's desk against the tip of her nose.

"I truly am sorry," Martine said.

"I'm all right," she mumbled, "or I will be, in a minute."

After a moment, she felt his hands on hers again, tentative and gentle. He really wasn't used to comforting people. Wasn't used to caring about people at all, she thought. The fact that he apparently cared about her was a warm little light inside her that gave her the strength to straighten her back and sit up.

"There's work to be done, isn't there," she said. "What are our orders?"

He smiled, and this time it was not a kind smile. "It seems," he said, voice heavy with significance, "we are to assassinate the sorceress. General Caraway of the Galbadian army has contracted with Garden to that effect."

She recognized that name; Martine had mentioned him a number of times in their letters. Like Martine, a patriot without much love for his government. That he would commission the assassination of a clear threat to his country's security wasn't surprising. There was something else in his words that was, though, so she fixated on that for the moment in lieu of letting the import of the rest fully sink in. "You make it sound like someone else is calling the shots on this," she said.

Martine's face became stone for a moment. "Someone else is, yes," he said. "I can't tell you more than that, unfortunately. I'm sworn to silence. Suffice to say that due to some very ill-advised decisions I made many years ago, when I first founded this Garden as an ambitious and short-sighted youngster with poor character judgement, I am not the final arbiter on matters of deployment. Not always, and not this time. I have received orders to assassinate the sorceress, and furthermore, I am to send a team of my own forces to carry out said objective. Therefore, I have a dilemma."

"Tell me about it," Quistis prompted. "Maybe I can help."

He regarded her for a long moment. "I have never believed in burdening one's subordinates with one's troubles," he said, "but in this case, I would appreciate your opinion."

"By all means."

He chewed his lip. "The thing is," he started, then stopped, and started again. "The fact of the matter is, my Garden makes good soldiers, and good mercenaries. They do very well against most opponents. But they've never fought a sorceress, and as mundane troops meant for mundane wars, they haven't been trained for it. None of them have much experience with magic, even para-magic."

Quistis began to see where he was going. "But we do," she said. "Balamb's SeeD program places heavy emphasis on it. If there's a sorceress to be assassinated, you should be sending us instead."

"Kramer concurs," Martine said, waving a letter written in a familiar hasty scrawl. "He gave this to your comrade Fujin to give to me in secret, after the primary orders were delivered. It requests that you be included in the strike team, despite his own orders to the contrary. That way, we have a better chance of success, and if things go pear-shaped, the sorceress will have two Gardens to retaliate against, splitting their forces and giving my Garden a better chance at survival. Of course it would mean countermanding the orders I've been given, which means I'd be relieved of my position at the very least, even you succeeded. Same goes for Kramer. If you failed... I'm sure you can imagine the consequences to yourself and your team, and the sorceress would have an even better excuse to commandeer this Garden and crush yours. I've made many difficult calls over the years, Quistis, but this one..."

"Send us," Quistis cut in without hesitation. "This request should have come to us in the first place anyway. Why didn't General Caraway contract with B-Garden? He knows you're beholden to Deling and the Galbadian government, doesn't he? B-Garden is unencumbered by obligation, better equipped, and has the added advantage of distance. We're much better suited to this than you."

"He and I old friends," Martine explained. "I haven't seen him since his daughter was born, but we were very close back in the day. He knew that my personal loyalty is to my country, not its government, and hoped that I would be sympathetic."

"And you were."

"I was. But I didn't expect the order to come to me, either. I passed the request on to my superior, and believed â€" for all the reasons you just detailed â€" that they would assign a B-Garden team. It seems I underestimated their sense of self-preservation."

His voice was bitter, uglier than she had ever heard it. She badly wanted to ask who this "superior" of his was, but knew he would protect his vow of secrecy and think less of her for asking him to break it.

"Send us," she said again, softly. "If you want to protect Galbadia and both of our Gardens, it's the smartest choice. I think you know that already."

Martine sighed heavily and crossed his arms. "I do." He hesitated, and grimaced. "If I'm completely honest, I asked for your opinion out of a selfish desire to ease my heart before I made the call I wanted to make. If I send you and you fail, Quistis, you will die."

"I'm a SeeD, headmaster," she said, putting emphasis on his rank. "Dying in the line of duty is part and parcel of that. You're making a good tactical call. If it costs me my life, so be it."

"And the lives of your team?" Martine said quietly.

Quistis hesitated, seeing Squall's lifeless face in her mind's eye, but steeled her jaw. She knew the answer to this, and it seemed he needed to hear it again, even though he should already know it as well as she did. "The same goes for them. If they weren't willing to risk their lives in battle, they wouldn't be here. Besides, it's not often we get to fight for a good cause like this. Give the order. There won't be any complaints, I guarantee it."

He chewed on it for a few moments longer, then slumped in his chair and visibly gave in. The defeated posture made him look older, by ten years he couldn't afford. "All right. You're right and we both know it, so here are your orders; go brief your team. I'll send the requested sniper down to meet you."

He handed her the relevant papers, and she took them with a steady hand.

"Roger," she said, and stood to leave, snapping a clean salute. She had her hand on the door already when she heard Martine stand up behind her and clear his throat.

"Quistis," he said hesitantly.

She turned back around and raised an eyebrow.

His face was very communicative in that moment; he looked very much like he wanted to call the whole thing off, keep her here where she would be safe, follow his orders and let the sorceress do her worst. Instead, he smiled as best he could and returned her salute; a high honour, considering their respective ranks. "Best of luck. I have every faith in you."

Her chest warmed, but she said nothing, only nodded and let the door close at her back.

There was work to be done.

Several weeks later

Fisherman's Horizon was beautiful, in its own way. She admired the efficiency of it, how it survived so far from civilization with so little to work with because it wasted nothing. Its philosophy she admired less, but then, she was a mercenary. That was to be expected.

In the high moonlight of the very late hours " or the very early hours, depending on one's perspective " the curving silver-blue scales of the solar array glittered. She sat on the ledge and watched the shifting patterns of dim and glow as the clouds passed, trying not to think about anything.

The Garden Festival had ended hours ago, and nobody would be interested in cleaning up until tomorrow.

The night was full of sound. No human voices, but the town itself was a chorus. The patchwork platform it was built on shifted with the wind and water, creaking and groaning, and she could hear the waves sloshing around the bridge's massive piles far below. It was a miracle the whole thing didn't fall into the sea. She yearned for solid ground.

"I am," said a familiar voice behind her, "profoundly glad to see you alive and well."

Quistis leapt to her feet like an unleashed spring and spun around, stunned. Martine stood there in the moonlight, hands clasped sheepishly behind his back, haggard but whole. She threw her arms around his neck and squeezed, briefly, then stepped back, suddenly self-conscious. "I thought you died," she said. "After all of that... I heardâ€"

"As it turned out, some few of my students maintained a little loyalty to me on a personal level," Martine said ruefully. "When she came for my Garden, they smuggled me out and gave me enough supplies to reach Timber. From there, I made my way here, not wishing to stay within easy reach. She knows I'm alive, I'm sure, and she knows by now that my signature was one of the two on that assassination order. I don't know how long she's likely to hold a grudge, but we'll fight that we'll flight."

"Well said," she said, furtively wiping at her eyes. "We took that advice, too. As you can see."

He turned to look across the town at the ghostly bulk of B-Garden, rising from the docks like an iceberg. "Yes, I see. I had no idea it could do that. I suppose mine likely can, too, as it's very similar in shape and origin to yours. You had best watch your six, Ms. Trepe."

"Believe me, we are," she assured him. "So... you're just going to stay here for a while? Lie low?"

"That is the plan," he agreed. "I haven't told the good mayor and mayoress much, but they know vaguely who I am, and they fervently disapprove of every life choice I have ever made but they say I'm welcome here anyway. Remarkable people. All I had to do was promise that I'd think about changing my ways, and at this point, I'd be wise to do so. A lifetime of war, and what have I achieved?" He spread his hands like they held an array of photographs detailing his myriad failures. "What have I got left to lose?"

Quistis bit her lip, then sat back down on the ledge and patted the spot to her right. Without a word, he gathered up the edges of his tattered coat and sat down beside her, close enough for their shoulders to touch. He looked a little silly, a big tall man in a big blue coat dangling his feet off the edge, but she probably looked a little silly too and there was no one else awake to see it anyway.

"Where should I address my next letter?" she asked after a few minutes of companionable silence. "Are you using your real name? Do you even have an address?"

He laughed. "I'm camping out in their basement. You could address it

to them, care of their freeloader. I don't think couriers come out here very often, though."

I'll come visit, then, she started to say, but closed her mouth on it. The sorceress was out there, aiming for world domination, probably piloting a flying Garden of her own. There was so much work to be done. She had no idea when she'd be back in the area next, if ever.

"You could come with us," she said instead, very softly.

Martine started, then regarded her for a moment with a considering look. Then he sighed. "Thank you, but no. Live in your Garden, relying on Kramer's good graces? He'd be unbearably smug. I'd rather drown."

She laughed and bumped his shoulder with her own. "We could smuggle you in. I know all the best hidey-holes, mostly because I spent a year rooting students out of them at ungodly hours of the morning."

"That isn't much better," he pointed out. "No, thank you again for the kind thought, but all told I think I'd rather stay where I am. It's not ideal, but it's enough for now. Until I decide what I want to do next. Or perhaps who I want to be next."

"Best of luck," she said. "I have every faith in you."

He turned to look at her, suddenly very serious and oddly young. "That's not fair," he said, "turning my own words back on me."

"Last I heard, turnabout was fair play," she retorted, but she was smiling.

"Someone taught you too well."

"There's no such thing."

A few more long minutes passed, silent but very comfortable. It wasn't a cold night, but if one sits still long enough in the absence of the sun it gets cold enough.

"Are we friends?" Quistis asked at last, wincing at how baldly it came out. She immediately considered qualifying it with a lot of things: _I'm not very good at this, you know, I only have one other friend and she didn't give me room to argue about it back when she decided for both of us, so I don't know what it's supposed to look like, normally._ She swallowed them. It spoke for itself, really, that she had to ask at all. That she couldn't recognize it if it was there.

Martine reached over and caught her left hand in his right. He hadn't been outside as long as she had; his hand was still a little warm. She curled her fingers into his. It seemed no small honour, to be allowed to do that. She had never seen Martine touch anyone else, or allow anyone else to touch him.

"Yes, Quistis Trepe," he said, "I think we are."

END

End
file.